# Editor’s Letter

June 1, 2004 By Walter Armstrong

The three guys gathered around a table on our cover this month are making news for making noise about the plague of crystal-meth-related HIV infections in New York City’s gay community. As a gay man who has thought deeply for many years about how and whether to stay negative, I want to thank Peter Staley, Bruce Kellerhouse and Dan Carlson for loving themselves and their community enough to take certain risks. They’ve publicized their frustration, fear and shame about the crystal-HIV crisis. They’ve mobilized the media. They’ve filled the big room at the Gay Center with their HIV Forums.

“Filling the big room at the Center” is known locally as the gold standard of gay activism. It rarely happens, but when it does, anger is almost always the feeling that draws the crowd. ACT UP was able to fill the big room every Monday night from 1987 to 1991. A few years later, during the Giuliani regime, commercial sex venues were being padlocked for not policing unsafe sex, and gay men were sufficiently exercised on a few memorable evenings to skip the gym and come to the Center to argue for their right to sex. Two small but significant groups grew out of those meetings, 1994’s AIDS Prevention Action League, which took a playful tack, engineering beyond-condom prevention and sex parties, and 1995’s Sex Panic!, which favored serious demos against cop crackdowns on sex clubs. We at *POZ* filled the big room once, by igniting controversy with our February 1999 barebacking issue. Stalwart activist/prevention provocateur Stephen Gendin filled the big room by dying, in June 2000. At each of these “town meetings,” I felt, no doubt like many others, a sense of power, purpose, even pride in our community—and a need to take action, to take part in saving our tribe.

Will any sustained action develop from the new HIV Forums? As Tim Murphy reports in the cover story, “Can We Talk?,” the only experienced activist of the three, Peter Staley, comes to the cause as an openly-HIV-positive-former-crystal-addict who exposed partners to HIV. Neither Kellerhouse nor Carlson, who are the real force behind the forums, has articulated a particular agenda other than to keep filling the big room—and keep people talking. Tim asks whether “their therapy-speak and Banana Republic blandness” make them “perfect facilitators for a post-protease, post–*Will & Grace*, post-9/11 activism.”

Whether any sustained action should develop from the HIV Forums is another question entirely. I wonder if, in fact, what we really need is more talk and less action. Instead of endlessly bemoaning the absence of street activism, we could look at it as unexpected evidence that we need to grow in some other way, focusing instead on tools still hidden to our untrained eyes. My old AIDS angers often strike me as sentimental and tattered, like my old silence = death T-shirts. If the crystal-sex

crisis has clarified anything, it is that gay men can be as efficient killers of themselves and one another as the greedy drug companies or the homophobic Bush administration—or even (God forbid!) our parents.

As a great poet wrote, “We must love one another or die.” That means finding new ways of protecting one another from the virus, accepting one another’s infections and imperfections, and learning to endure our self-hatred and emptiness rather than seeking oblivion in sex, drugs or drink. Such healing is found, of course, not at the barricades but in therapy, recovery and the 12-step programs in the Gay Center’s many small rooms, where the media and the critical mass don’t show. And it may make the talk in the big room tough and truthful enough to undo two decades of damage that positive and negative gay men have done to one another in miraculously defeating our decimation by AIDS.

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